

The South Danvers Observer

That Was Then, This Is Now

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Workers trimming leather, c. 1945

—Peabody's past is mirrored in the history of its most famous industry—leather. And yet, despite the fact that Peabody was once called the Leather City, leather hasn't always been its most important livelihood.

During the 1600s, the early settlers relied on trade with England, their own farms and the sea for most of their necessities. During the winter months, when they were confined inside, people turned to other enterprises, either to earn some much needed cash or for bartering with their neighbors. One of those early enterprises was leather tanning.

Tanning leather made sense. After all, the town was named Brooksby for a good reason. There were numerous streams in the area. Not only was water necessary for leather tanning, many of the farmers also owned cattle and goats, essential for the trade.

So much readily available

water provided a necessary power source for other concerns as well. Many mills thrived here. There were fulling mills, nail mills, gristmills and sawmills. Some even wonder if Gideon Foster might have had one of the first chocolate mills in the area. Other early businesses included soapmaking, glassmaking, and numerous potteries. By the early 19th century there was also a cotton factory and a glue factory in town.

But it was leather that ended up shaping Peabody's landscape, its economy **and** its people.

It is uncertain who was the first tanner in what is now present day Peabody. The earliest mention of tanning as a possible livelihood in northeastern Massachusetts came in 1630 when Francis Higginson, one of the first settlers, noted the many cattle and the sumac trees that populated the area. The bark from such trees was perfect for the tanning of skins into leather.

Because the price of cattle was high, the courts fined those who didn't make use of the skins for leather when they slaughtered their animals. Waste not, want not was more than just a proverb.

Though it is impossible to prove, records indicate that the first person in the Salem area to enter into leatherwork as a business was Philemon Dickerson in 1639. No one is positive where he set up his vats. What is known is that the first tanners in 17th century Salem operated east of Washington Street, which gave them easy access to water.

The first tanners in South Danvers, or the "Middle Precinct" as the town was called when we were still part of Salem, set up shop in the area called Blubber Hollow, located on the present day Salem/Peabody boundary. The Blubber of Blubber Hollow referred to the whale blubber brought there for use in the tanning industry. The trade was regulated early on as evidenced by the election **(continued on page 4)**

The Railroad Controversy



Train Depot in 1914

—The struggle to bring the railroad to South Danvers began in 1836. It was then those attending the Town Meeting began to consider the advantages of a railroad in town. The town urged the State's Legislature to insist the Eastern Railroad have a direct route into Boston, rather than stopping at the Winnisimmet Ferry in Chelsea, forcing people to take a boat for the rest of the way into Boston. As time went on, though, more and more people looked forward to the day when Danvers would have a railroad in town.

It took over ten years before that dream became a reality. David Pingree petitioned the Legislature on the town's behalf and Rufus Choate took on the case, arguing that it was time for the Eastern Railroad to have a line in Danvers. The petition was denied but not all was lost.

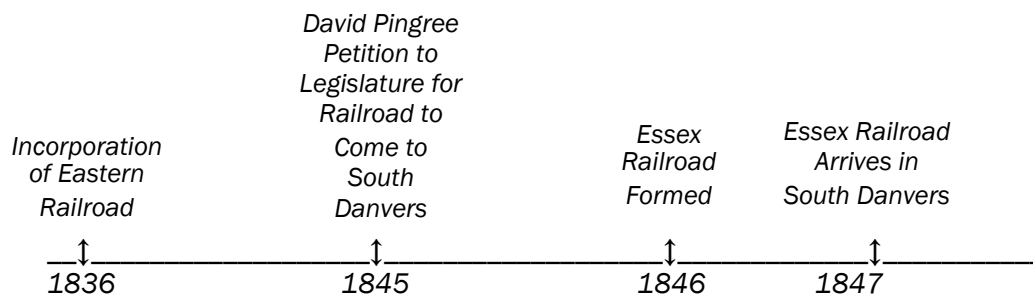
Danvers worked with the Essex Railroad to establish a line from Salem through South Danvers

to Lawrence. And on January 18th, 1847, the first train chugged to a stop at the South Danvers' new depot, located on what is the present day municipal parking lot across from the Wallis Street Post Office. The Essex Railroad had its grand opening in South Danvers on January 18th, 1847.

A week before the Grand Opening, though, in homage to the town's increasing prominence in the leather industry, a freight train deposited a large pile of hemlock bark from northern forest for use by the local tanners. By 1850, two more railroads built lines through South Danvers—the South Reading Railroad and the Salem and Lowell Railroad.

While the leather industry shaped the town, these railroads were instrumental as well. They brought into town supplies for the tanneries, as well as many new workers. They also were essential for the tanneries to deliver their leather into Boston and eventually throughout the country.

Timeline of Railroad Controversy



Peabody Leather Industry and Its Early Influence on Labor Unions

—When remembering the history of the labor movement in this area, many think of the Lowell Mill Girls and how they went out on strike in 1834 and 1835. Those work stoppages drew between 700 to 1500 strikers.

In 1842, Massachusetts passed a law forbidding children under the age of 15 from working longer than ten hours a day. The law was seldom enforced however. And so worker unrest continued. By 1848, New England had formed a Labor Reform League in an attempt to address the myriad abuses which workers continued to endure. The people of South Danvers followed the story with great interest in their local newspaper, the *Danvers Courier*.

The labor movement in New England, which pushed for decent wages and an eight hour day, grew rapidly during the 1850s and 1860s. Few people realize, however, that our area was the home of one of the largest strikes ever held before the Civil War.

Though the labor movement had been growing, it was the Panic of 1857 that lit a fire beneath the growing frustration of local workers. This Panic caused stock prices to fall by half and thousands of businesses to fail. Many area shoeworkers lost their jobs in this economic downturn. And like a line of dominoes, once these shoeworkers were fired, the leather demand plummeted in South Danvers. But when the economy began a shaky recovery a couple of years later, factory owners refused to hire workers back at their old wages. Instead they offered only \$3 a week to men and a \$1 a week to women. The workers demanded a return to their old wages. The owners refused.

Workers chose Feb. 22, 1860—George Washington's birthday—to walk out. 10,000 men and women marched from Lynn, through Salem, South Danvers and other Essex County towns. Police from Boston as well as the militia were called in to prevent violence. Police were also used to insure that strikers didn't interfere with shoes being shipped out of state.

The strike soon came to the attention of the new president, Abraham Lincoln. He spoke in support of the workers, but factory owners wouldn't listen. Without the

support of a union, the shoeworkers were unable to endure ongoing weeks without an income and most workers were forced to return to their jobs by late March. The protest might have ended but labor unrest continued. As a result many workers formed "associations," or what was the seed of what would later become unions.

In 1863, with the war at its height, workers at Pinder and Brown struck for higher wages, asking for \$9 a week. Considering the cost of living went up approximately 60% during the war, this wasn't an unreasonable demand. In fact, most wages only rose a little during the Civil War. When the cost of inflation was factored in, most workers actually made less they did before the Panic of 1857.

In 1864, more workers left their jobs to protest the owners of the factories unwillingness to agree to their terms. This time the owners conceded on higher wages but little else. Strikes and walkouts continued off and on in Peabody into the 20th century. And ultimately, with the formation of local labor unions, the rights of workers finally began to be addressed.

"The strike of the curriers is assuming a position of no considerable local importance. . . . The question is, as it now stands, is simply, whether a large number of the laboring, wealth-producing portion of our people shall leave the place and give their industry and their skill in building up some other community . . . or whether a spirit of mutual compromise . . . shall prevail and the town of South Danvers. . . . So far as the curriers simply ask for a rise in the price of labor, corresponding to the rise in the price of the necessities of life, they are clearly right. . . . The strikers resolved not to work in shops where men were employed who did not belong to their association. As counter-balance, the bosses resolved not to employ any man who did belong to the association. . . . and the matter stands at a dead-lock. . . ."

From the *South Danvers Wizard*
Jan. 27, 1864

For once we covet the gift of eloquence that we might gather the Working Men of New England, in multitudes, at the meeting of the Labor Reform League, to be held in this city, on the third Wednesday of this New Year. They should come in bannered hosts and glittering trains, bearing the insignia of Justice. They should come, not with fierce oath, lance and spear, nor death-booming cannon, but with words of helpful cheer; with hoe and spade, fore-plane and trowel, up to the founding of the Temple of Industry.

From the *Danvers Courier*
January 15, 1848

"The Morocco Dressers in this vicinity have recently struck for higher wages, and the bosses, we understand, have acceded to their prices but they claim and say they shall exercise the right to employ as many apprentices, and any class of workmen that they may require, without dictation from the Morocco Shavers and Finishers Association; and that they will not employ any workmen that does not accede to these declarations."

From the *South Danvers Wizard*, May 18, 1864

That Was Then, This is Now

(Continued)

(continued from page 1)

of sealers of leather. But these early tanners had very small concerns. It wasn't until South Danvers' Joseph Southwick invented the bark mill in 1750 that tanning could expand enough to be called an industry.

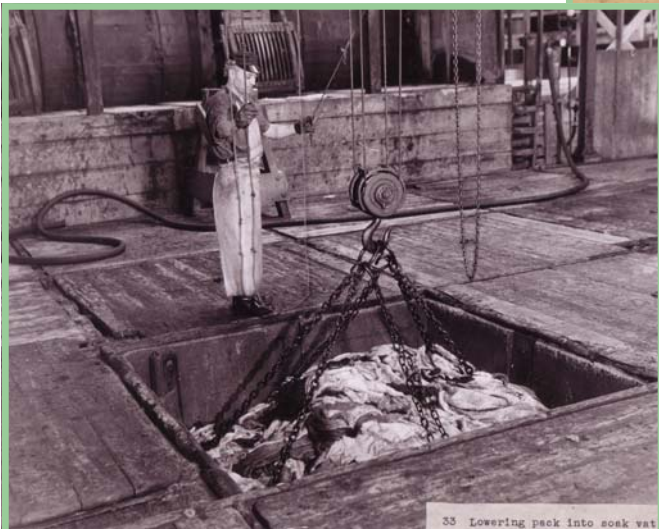
With the bark mill easing some of the labor involved in tanning, leather workers were able to spread to both sides of the North River and into downtown South Danvers. Despite Southwick's invention, the work was still grueling. Even so, by 1835, it was reported that Danvers had 3500 tanning vats and produced 140,000 sides of leather each year. During the Civil War, South Danvers produced 35% of the country's morocco (leather from goatskin).

Most of the other industries in the city in the late 19th century and early 20th revolved around the leather industry. Grease and oil works provided some of the necessary ingredients for leather production; bark mills produced one of the most important ingredients for the industry; hardware and machine shops provided parts and machinery for the tanneries; shoe and sole manufacturers used the leather produced for their products and boot and shoe stores sold the end result. Grocery and other retail stores relied on the leather workers for their success, as did clothiers, boarding houses and almost every other business in the city.

Like the ripples in a pond, everyone in Peabody was somehow tied to the leather industry. By the 1960s, however, the industry began a slow decline, one that continued into the 1980s. Peabody wasn't alone in having to adjust to a changing world. Leather work might have been grueling and certainly wasn't pretty, but it gave to thousands of workers a livelihood that supported them and opened the doors to a life they might not have had anywhere else.



Above
Working in the Seasoning Room



Below
Lowering skins into vat

Works consulted for this newsletter:

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